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# The Great Plains Conservation Program

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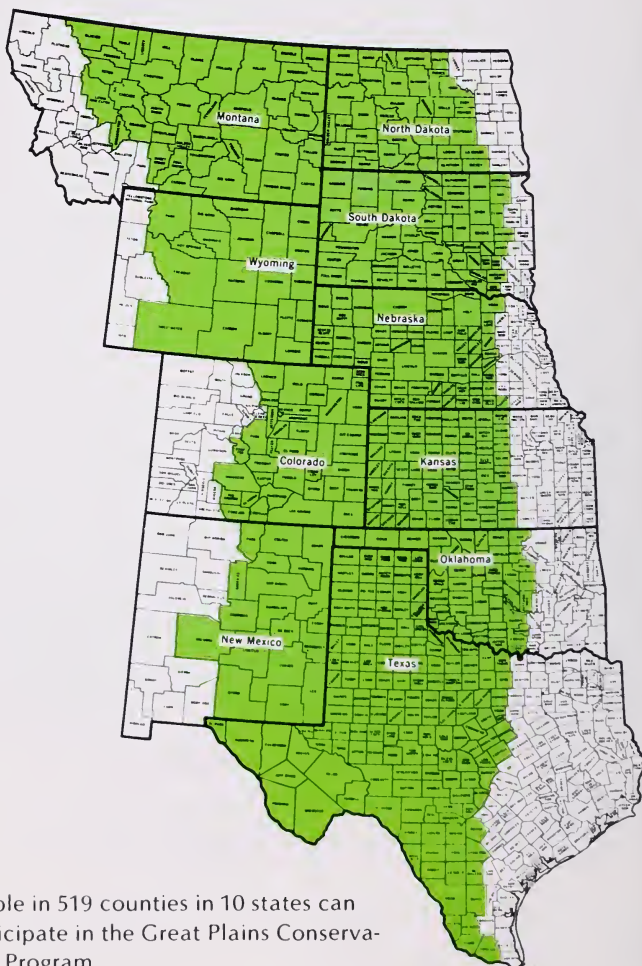
## A Program That Works

From November through May each year, powerful, sustained windstorms are almost sure to sweep across the 10 states that make up the Great Plains.

If the year has been dry or, worse yet, one of a succession of dry years, the wind will pick up any loose soil and move it, sometimes for short distances, sometimes for hundreds of miles.

The agricultural hazards of the region, dramatized by the Dust Bowl days of the 1930's and another severe drought in the 1950's, led Congress to create the Great Plains Conservation Program (GPCP) in 1956. Since then, this voluntary program has been helping farmers and ranchers in the region to protect their light and fragile soils from erosion and to stabilize production in this drought-prone area.

The GPCP offers long-term technical assistance and cost-sharing through the USDA's Soil Conservation Service (SCS). The length of the contracts, 3 to 10 years, allows landowners to apply complete soil and water conservation



People in 519 counties in 10 states can participate in the Great Plains Conservation Program.





Permanent fences let landowners rotate grazing among fields to prevent overgrazing.

systems suited to their own special needs. So far, each federal dollar invested in GPCP has yielded nearly \$4 in increased agricultural income.

And the region is well worth protecting. Dubbed “the Great American Desert” in the mid-19th century, it is better known today as “America’s Breadbasket.” Despite typical rainfall of only 10 to 20 inches a year, the Great Plains produces 60 percent of our wheat and 30 percent of our beef cattle.

### **How GPCP Works**

- The Secretary of Agriculture determines a county’s eligibility and designates it for participation in GPCP.
- A landowner in an eligible county develops a conservation plan to meet the needs of the farm or ranch. SCS provides technical help.
- The landowner signs a contract with USDA, agreeing to install the conservation practices on a 3- to 10-year schedule.
- USDA pays the landowner from 50 to 80 percent of the cost of each approved practice as it is completed. The rate varies according to how urgently the practice is needed in an area. The landowner pays the rest.
- Contracts are flexible, so the landowner can move ahead more quickly than the plan calls for, or can modify the contract to meet changes brought about by market conditions or natural disasters.

- SCS gives technical assistance in installing and maintaining the conservation practices through the term of the contract.
- Money for the entire plan is earmarked when the contract is signed, so contract payments do not depend on annual appropriations. The maximum for any one contract is \$35,000. The total cap on cost-share payments is \$50 million for any program year and \$600 million overall. Contracts may be signed through September 30, 1991.

Mechanically removing cholla cactus, a competing shrub, improves grassland.



Seeded grass holds the soil in place and improves forage for livestock.

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## What GPCP Has Accomplished

By the early 1980's, farmers and ranchers had signed some 60,000 GPCP contracts with SCS. They had established more than 5 million acres of permanent plant cover on land difficult to protect when in crops. They had planted 65,000 acres of windbreaks and had built 15,000 miles of pipelines to carry water to livestock. They had switched to stripcropping on more than 1 million acres.

Besides installing these and other measures to reduce erosion and improve water conservation and use, participants also have improved fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, and recreational facilities. Most important, the program has contributed to the overall improvement of farm and ranch life in the region, and, with nearly 10,000 contracts still active, it continues to do so.

But much more needs to be done. In the 1980's more than 65 million acres in the Great Plains lie exposed to possible wind erosion. About 50 million acres are vulnerable to water erosion caused by intense thunderstorms that often follow periods of drought.

The challenge for conservationists remains because another drought is always just around the corner.



Pipelines and stock tanks allow grazing to be evenly distributed since livestock won't travel far from water.





Use of diagonal strips protects soil on this field from prevailing northwest winds.

## What GPCP Can Do

Through GPCP, SCS pays part of the cost of 33 different conservation practices. Some of the most frequently used practices are:

- Reseeding of grassland
- Permanent plant cover
- Erosion-control dams
- Windbreaks
- Terraces
- Livestock watering facilities
- Streambank stabilization
- Fencing
- Stripcropping
- Irrigation system improvement

Though the program is available throughout the Great Plains, each state sets its priorities on where funds will be provided and what the rate will be for each practice.

For a complete list of approved practices, cost-sharing percentages in each area, or other information about GPCP, contact the local soil conservation district or SCS field office, usually located in the county seat.

All programs and services of the Soil Conservation Service are offered on a nondiscriminatory basis, without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, marital status, or handicap.

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